

From, “Re-Telling the Stories of Others: Oral History Interviewing and Writing,” 16 April 2005  
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Gathering the stories of others is only part of your responsibility in doing life history research. You must also, with clarity, authenticity and appropriateness, re-tell those stories to any number of audiences. When someone shares his or her most cherished stories with you, you have the added and enormous responsibility of getting it right in the first place – of conveying the essence and meaning of the original stories – and then, in the act of re-telling it, rendering that story accessible to any reader who may engage the life history, at any time, under any circumstance. It is as if you are constructing a “**word bridge**,” anchored at one end in the voice of your interviewee and at the other in the ears of your audiences, and carefully engineering the structure of the bridge in such manner as to allow the free flow of travelers over its expanse. There are thus at least three distinct considerations in writing and presenting someone’s life history – getting it right, rendering it accessibility, and linking the style and format of the writing with the content of the story.

1. “**Getting it right.**” It is important to acknowledge throughout the life history research process that the stories being shared with you are the “cultural and intellectual property” of the interviewee. The stories belong to the individual and family from which they originate; not to you, or to any other organization. It is a sacred trust that has been bestowed upon you to get, what is considered most cherished by someone else, *right*. This is why you need to have your interviewee carefully review the final drafts of your project. It is only he or she who can assure that the written story is authentically presented and accurate to the best of his or her understandings. And it is only he or she who can also assure that the stories that are to be shared publically are appropriate to share in the first place. There are some family events that should be kept within the family. Allow the judgement of your interviewee to be the best guide on what others come to learn. Remember that your ultimate goal is to re-tell the stories of the interviewee based upon two critical criteria: **authenticity** and **appropriateness** of the stories.

2. “**Rendering the Story Accessibility.**” Implicit in the very act of writing down someone’s story is the sharing of that story with someone else. It makes little sense to write down a wonderful life history only to have it kept shelved in a book case. A life history project is meant to be shared. So you must anticipate your audiences, as you must also seek to render your written stories accessible to them. Become cognizant of who might access the life history, at any time in the future – be it a great, great grand child of the interviewee, or a perfect stranger. Long after your interviewee has passed on, long after you have passed on, what you pen to paper today could be pulled off a book self some where and read by someone 200 years from now. As you construct your presentation, attempt to speak to them, re-telling the stories of another to others. While always firmly anchored in the voice of your interviewee, consider how your interview might speak with a great, great grand child or to that perfect stranger. This often necessitates you anticipating what might be unclear in the words of the interviewee and providing additional contextual history or social background on specific events or situations.

3. “**Style and Format.**” As you know there is a unequivocal relationship between *what* you are trying to say, and *how* you say it – between the content of the story and the style of its re-telling. In your “getting it right” yet rendering it “accessible,” you must deliberate carefully on the manner of how you want to write down and present the stories. Consider the style and format of your writing. You have been handed a wonderful story to tell. For example, it would be inappropriate to re-tell an emotionally-charged, very personal event in someone’s life by using rather formal, scientific jargon and idioms, and illustrating it with a series of bar graphs and statistical tables! In addition, the style and format you use to re-tell a story should also be in the “language” that renders that story accessible and understandable by other readers. For example, you would not use the formality of a college-level textbook as the style to present the stories to fourth graders. Experiment with alternative ways of presenting the same story. Consider poetic and narrative styles, as well as formal styles. Consider the inclusion of visual imagery, photographs, and art work in your presentation. Consider a format that includes actual audio and/or video clips of the voice of your interviewee. With the advent of digital technology, such as DVDs and the Internet, there is now an explosion of possible creative ways to re-tell the life history stories of others, rendering them even more authentic and yet accessible than ever before.

A final note or two. As a human being who has been entrusted with what could be someone’s most cherished stories, at some point in your written text **acknowledge who you are** and your role in this interviewing and writing process. In any research and writing endeavor you can never stand outside, as if an unbiased neutral observer. How you have asked questions, how you have responded with follow-up questions during an interview, how you have organized the stories and the means used in presenting those stories, who you dialogue with your interviewee and with the future audiences, all presumes you a part of the research and writing process. You are not a silent partner, but an essential collaborator in re-telling someone’s stories

Remember always that in doing a life history project, a sacred trust has been bestowed upon you, that you must be willing to carry forth with all your passion and commitment. But always remember the humanity of this process and be willing to laugh or shed a tear, and **have some fun** throughout the endeavor. As you exude passion and vitality so too will your re-telling.